
2.3 PLANT SELECTION AND GARDEN DESIGN



2.3.1 Plant Selection

Native plant species are recommended for use in a rain garden. These plants have dense and deep growing root systems so they will help more water soak into the ground. Because they are native to this area, the plants recommended in this manual are adapted to growing conditions in Northeastern Indiana. Once they are well established, these rain garden plants will withstand both frequent dry conditions and periods of time when they may be standing in water. Also the plants suggested here are perennials, which means they will come back from year to year. The flowering plants will produce blooms for many years into the future.



There are potentially more than 100 plants native to the area that can be used in a rain garden. Table 1 provides a list of several common native perennial plants that would do well in rain gardens in Fort Wayne. Appendices A and B provide more extensive plant lists in which hearty native species are listed. There may be other plants with similar names or plants that look similar, but those could be hybrids that need special care or plants that are not perennials in our climate. Consider

choosing the plants that are listed in this manual, or talk with professionals at local nurseries or local master gardeners for additional plant possibilities.



We recommend that plants or plugs be used to establish and delineate your rain garden plant layout, as opposed to establishing your rain garden from seeds. If you will be planting established plants (also known as plugs) you will need one plant for every two and a half square feet. To decide how many plants you will need, divide the

square footage of your rain garden by 1.5. For example, if your rain garden will be 75 square feet, you will need to purchase approximately 50 plants.

Before selecting plants for your garden, consider how you might want the garden to look at various times of the year. You may want to select plants that will bloom at different times so that you can have color in the garden from spring to fall. You may want a riot of color or you may want to limit the garden palette to just a few complementary or contrasting colors. Certain plants are known for attracting butterflies, hummingbirds or other wildlife. It may be worth doing some research before buying plants to be sure you are getting plants that will give the garden the look that you want to achieve.

Every plant has its own optimal growing conditions. The following sections can help you select plants and lay out a garden design that will maximize growing conditions to create a vibrant and beautiful mixture of looks for your rain garden.

Aggressive Plants: None of the native plants listed in this manual are “invasive species” but some will spread aggressively. An unofficial definition of an invasive species is a species that does not naturally occur in a specific area and whose introduction does or is likely to cause economic or environmental harm or harm to human health. Because they are not native to the area, invasive species do not have natural predators to keep their growth in check. Also, they spread very rapidly, so they crowd out native species.

The plants recommended in this manual are all native to the upper Midwest, but some of the plants may grow more aggressively than others by reseeding themselves or extending their roots. In our area New England Aster is a very aggressive plant and may push out other plants. Some plants are aggressive but will just fill in empty spaces in the garden. When selecting plants for your



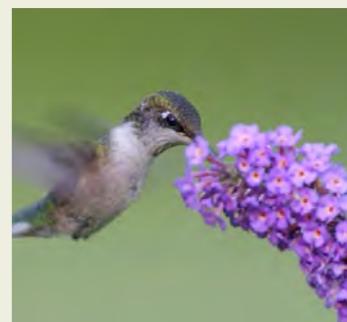


rain garden, ask at a nursery or check the web sites listed in the Resources section to learn more about plants that may spread aggressively.

2.3.2 Rain Garden Layout

The options for rain garden designs are unlimited. As a starting point for your own rain garden design, Appendix C shows detailed local rain garden plans for a variety of gardens using the recommended plant list provided in Table 1. These plans divide the garden into zones based on plant size and water tolerance and provide a good starting point if you have a bit of gardening experience. The zones are described below. If you are an experienced gardener, or as your knowledge grows, you may want to create your own rain garden designs. You can be adventurous with your plant selections while keeping in mind that different plants have differing needs for sunshine and soil drainage. Don't be afraid to try out ideas until you find the right mix for your individual rain garden. Like most gardens, a rain garden may always be a work in progress.

The sample rain garden layouts provided in this manual group plants with height, color and seasonal bloom in mind. Native plants are a natural choice for rain gardens because their deep roots make it easy for water to move down into the soil. These plants are low maintenance, reduce runoff and enhance air and water quality. Many native plants tolerate short periods of standing water and are also drought tolerant so they can withstand pooling during a rain storm and don't need to be watered as often. These plants live longer than non-native species because they are winter hardy and are less prone to insect damage and disease. Additionally, fertilizer should not be necessary in a rain garden planted with native plants.



“DON'T
OVERCROWD
ME”

Be careful not to space plants too close. The gaps between plants will fill in over time.

When selecting plants and choosing a layout for a rain garden it is important to pay close attention to the following factors:

- The water tolerance and requirements of the plants. Plants that like saturated or moist soil conditions should be placed in the deepest section of the rain garden (typically the center). Plants that prefer average conditions may be planted around the sides of the rain garden. Plants that prefer dry soil conditions should be located around the top edges or front of the rain garden.
- The amount of sun exposure the rain garden will receive and sun preferences of plants. Most plant books or catalogues will provide sun/shade guides for plants.
- The blooming period, bloom color and non-bloom color of the plants. Choose a mix of plants that will bloom in spring, summer and fall to provide flowers throughout the growing season. Choose plants with varying colored blooms and distribute colors evenly to create interest. Remember that plant foliage and stems can provide color interest even when the plants are not in bloom.
- The height/size of each plant. Plants that are very tall or wide may cover or shade smaller plants. Stair-step plant heights with the tallest in the back and shorter plants toward the front.
- By providing nectar, berries, seeds and shelter, certain plants may attract wildlife such as birds, rabbits, squirrels, deer, butterflies and other insects to the rain garden. When choosing plants, consider what wildlife you want to attract.

Plants and salt: Salt used to melt ice causes the most damage to plants if it is splashed on them or clings to the leaves and stems while the plants are growing. The perennial plants in your garden will be mostly dormant during the winter, so salt damage to the plants themselves is not very likely. Also, if most of the rain water going to your garden comes from your roof, you won't need to worry about the salt tolerance of plants.

If your garden will receive runoff from a driveway, sidewalk or roadway that is heavily salted in winter, you can choose a garden location and select plants to reduce the chance of salt damage. Heavy clay soil may retain salt. If you have clay soil, consider choosing plants with a higher salt tolerance. Your nursery or garden center can advise you on plant selection. Another option is to locate and design your garden to minimize the salt that gets into it in the first place. Consider leaving a grass strip between your garden and the driveway or roadway that drains into it. This will allow the grassy area to filter out some of salt before the rain water runoff or snow melt gets to your garden. If you have very sandy soil most of the salt will be flushed through the garden before plants start growing in the spring.